



An Interview with Heaven 17's Martyn Ware

HEAVEN SENT

PHOTO BY ANTON CORBIN



If Phil Oakey and Adrian Wright were the poor cousins of the old Human League then Martyn Ware and Ian Marsh were the golden boys. Their Heaven 17 creation, in its various facets, has been almost as influential as Joy Division in shaping certain strands of British music fashion.

Originally from Sheffield they are now resident in London, a move deemed necessary according to Ware in order "to keep an eye on the record company."

Why, don't you trust your record company? "You can never trust a record company but Virgin are better than most. When I say keep an eye on them I mean make sure they're on the ball. They have a roster of twenty to thirty acts and we wanna make sure we're high on the priority list. They're the best company for us as we have a responsible attitude towards the business and you can walk in and talk to the managing director anytime you want — you couldn't do that with the big conglomerates."

Serious character assessments/guesses are impossible over the phone but Ware gives the impression through his dry, controlled and fading Northern accent of a man who leaves nothing to chance. Rationality, not emotion, would guide his life. A businessman.

So how important is commercial success to Heaven 17?

"It enables us to continue. We've got all we want in terms of personal happiness. We're all married except Ian, and he might as well be married. We've all got new houses and a nice circle of friends and if only we had more time at home we'd have a perfectly happy home life. That's the basis of our happiness. Commercial success is a bonus, we're not obsessed with world domination. But having said that we are very professional and we do everything in our power to ensure success. We are workaholics in that respect."

Last year they released the pointless *Music of Quality and Distinction*, an album of guest artists singing various classics arranged by Ware and co. The whole thing seemed like a symptom of the luxury of success.

"You're right. By the time we started it we knew *Penthouse and Pavement* was a success so we thought we'd aim for the top. To a certain extent our ambition paid off as we made a lot of contacts through having the cheek to do the album and approach so many people that we wouldn't normally have met."

"Commercially it didn't pay off which was a drag and that depressed us a great deal to the extent that for two or three months we couldn't actually do anything as we were so convinced that at the very least it was a worthwhile and innovative project."

The album's blend of old and new (Sandie Shaw and Tina Turner singing on the same record as Billy McKenzie and Glenn Gregory) was incongruous but boring. But how did you approach people like Sandie Shaw and Tina Turner? Was it just a matter of getting on the phone and saying: "Hello, I'm Martyn Ware?"

"More or less. You can only ask people. We were giving them a very good deal. All they had to do was come into the studio for a couple of hours, put down a vocal and they got £2000 and half of the recording royalties. It was hardly hard work for them and we were offering them, potentially, a new aspect to their career."

What prompted you to do the album?

"We just fancied the idea. We'd always done cover versions with the old Human League, and it occurred to us that it would be good to do

"It's fashionable to claim you're working class but until you've been working class in Sheffield it's hard to imagine how bad working class can be."

an album, but not like *Pin Ups*. One of the theories under which we work is the juxtaposition of what would seem to be incongruous ideas like marrying the serious political lyrics of 'Fascist Groove Thang' to electronic funk backing. We thought that the BEF album would be the ultimate configuration of that part of our personalities."

And this brings us to *Penthouse and Pavement*, Heaven 17's first and, to date, major triumph. It remains a modern blueprint of political and social dissatisfaction couched in establishment funk/disco. It was this incongruity and ambivalence between lyric and music that made it so arresting and seductive. The use of black music clichés was an inspiration, an ironic slap in the face of musical conformity and commercial compromise. How did the band hit on this idea?

"It was the summer of 1980 and we were still

in Sheffield and we weren't communicating or getting on too well in the Human League. We knew we had to write another album but everybody was going to the studio at different times and there was a lot of tension. I never socialised with the other members as I had a different circle of friends and we listened to this particular tape all summer which consisted of a lot of black disco music of the late 70s and some went as far back as James Brown. So that summer influenced the way we finally turned otherwise we may well have turned into a more direct competition with the Human League in more European based music."

Do you feel as if you are competing with them?

"No, as we don't have very much in common. It's ironic but we were both on *Top of the Pop's* thousandth edition and that week we were No 2 in the charts and they were No 3 and I think they were showing a lot more tension than we were to be on it. Once you've had such phenomenal success it's hard to account for it and looking back you start worrying what the magic formula was as you didn't understand it at the time."

The Human League split resulted in two distinct bands emerging. Oakey and Wright have continued with their pop ambitions while Ware and Marsh concentrate on abstract interpretations of world events. Was this fundamental difference in approach a major cause in the break-up of the old Human League?

"Not at all. We used to have arguments and it just got to the point where we couldn't get on. There were ideological differences but it would be very pompous to split a group on that basis. Although, ironically, the three of us in Heaven 17 have identical ideas and that's probably why we get on so well."

Did you expect Oakey and Wright to be as successful as they have been?

"No, that would have been impossible to predict and I'm sure they didn't think that they would be that successful."

Were there signs in the old Human League that they had talent?

"Phillip always wrote half the lyrics with me and he wrote a lot of vocal melody lines but he could never write song structures. Adrian had never written a song before in his life and I think he still hasn't, actually. And Bob Last knew this and a good friend of his was Jo Callis (Last used to manage Callis' Rezillos) and he knew Jo was a good songwriter and I believe Jo's talent is the foundation on which most of the songs are written."

With the release in 1981 of the single 'Fascist Groove Thang' and the album *Penthouse and Pavement*, Heaven 17 were the critics' blue-eyed boys. They had arrived and they were made to feel like major artists. Did the band feel that pressure?

"No, we didn't think we were major artists. It was like being released from a straitjacket after the time we'd had in the Human League. We were doing what we wanted and it just happened to fit in with a lot of people's vision of what the future was going to be like and as it transpired it turned out to be fairly accurate. Especially in Britain where a lot of bands have turned towards black music for inspiration, whereas when *Penthouse and Pavement* was released we were still in the throes of Gary Numan clones."

Does your music have to reflect society to be pertinent?

"Pop music isn't a very important part in the scheme of things, it is a release but we would feel that we were wasting half of our song-writing if we wrote good songs with gibberish lyrics. Eighty percent of groups don't seem to have the interest to write interesting lyrics. They're more interested in mimicking successful records of the past and making a few bucks in the process."

There was something like an eighteen month gap between *Penthouse and Pavement* and this year's *Luxury Gap*. Surely Virgin applied pressure on the band for a more immediate follow-up?

"No, they were very patient and in fact a major part of my respect for them lies in the fact that although *Music of Quality and Distinction* was expensive, the *Luxury Gap* was very, very expensive and we never had one complaint about the escalating costs. We asked that no one was to come down in the middle of sessions and they honoured that, and in fact we just presented the album as a fait d'accompli. They trusted us and I think that's amazing."

But why was there such a time lag between the two albums?

"Well, the *Music of Q & D* album, the months of disappointment after that failed, we watched the World Cup for a month and then we started writing and for us that's a lengthy process. We start with rudimentary recordings on a casiotone then from there to an eight track to do reasonable demos and work out arrangements and then we go to the studio and attack it from scratch, hopefully without too many misconceptions. We write the lyrics in the studio as well."

And so to *The Luxury Gap*, a continuation of the process marked out by *Penthouse and Pavement* with its division of themes into two separate sides of music — Side One is drudgery and Side Two escapism. A fair assessment?

(Pause) "That's a very insightful thought. I've never actually thought of it as drudgery and escapism. It was meant to be divided into two separate sides but what you've said is the nearest we've come to any coherent statement as to

"... the British press don't know what they're doing... they're more interested in whether you're fashionable or not, not whether something's good or bad."

what they are. I think you're right, actually.

"We wanted the second side to be softer. The first side was meant to be a more technically proficient version of the first side of *Penthouse and Pavement* and the second side was to be a combination of electronics, ballads and orchestra. Technically there was a division between the two sides but as regards subject matter I've never really thought about it."

"The basic theory of the album was to emphasise and consolidate the stuff that was on *Penthouse and Pavement*, particularly class divisions and the injustice of a lot of it."

The Luxury Gap sports an industrial cover, a sign of working class affiliations and the drudgery of the day to day work ethic. How have you been involved in this?

(Incredulous) "You're joking. It's fashionable to claim you're working class but until you've

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